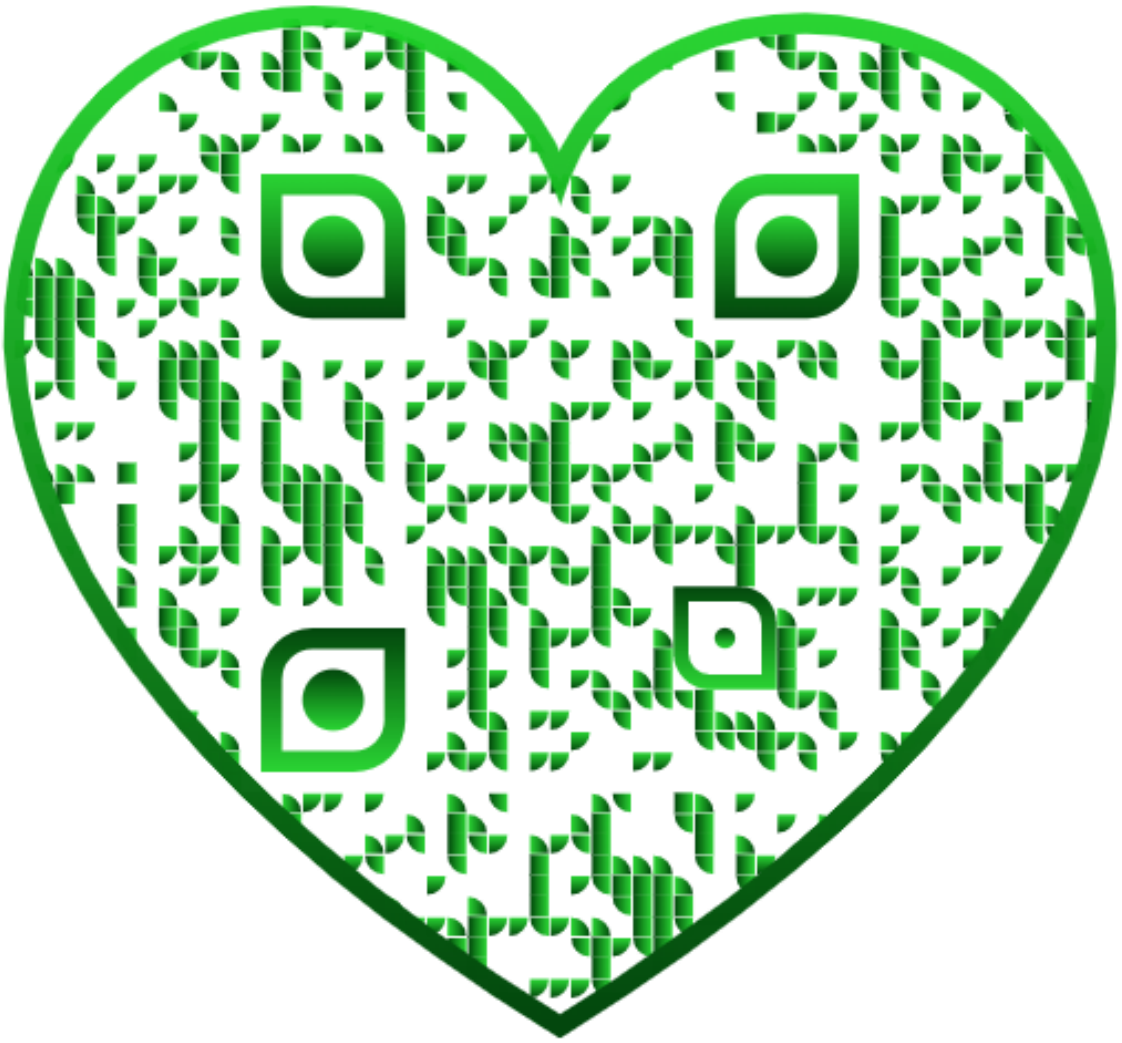
CHARLES RIVER EDITORS

HORUS

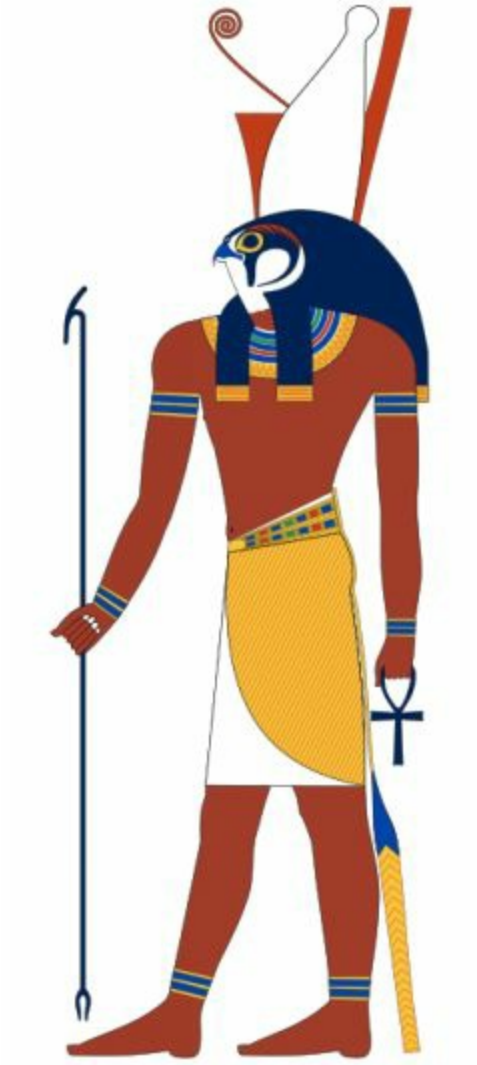
The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Was the Son of Isis and Osiris

MARKUS CARABAS



Horus: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Was the Son of Isis and Osiris

By Markus Carabas and Charles River Editors



Jeff Dahl's depiction of Horus

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Introduction

The Eye of Horus

Horus

Africa may have given rise to the first human beings, and Egypt probably gave rise to the first great civilizations, which continue to fascinate modern societies across the globe nearly 5,000 years later. From the Library and Lighthouse of Alexandria to the Great Pyramid at Giza, the Ancient Egyptians produced several wonders of the world, revolutionized architecture and construction, created some of the world's first systems of mathematics and medicine, and established language and art that spread across the known world. With world-famous leaders like King Tut and Cleopatra, it's no wonder that today's world has so many Egyptologists.

What makes the accomplishments of the Ancient Egyptians all the more remarkable is that Egypt was historically a place of great political turbulence. Its position made it both valuable and vulnerable to tribes across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and Ancient Egypt had no shortage of its own internecine warfare. Its most famous conquerors would come from Europe, with Alexander the Great laying the groundwork for the Hellenic Ptolemy line and the Romans extinguishing that line after defeating Cleopatra and driving her to suicide.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of ancient Egyptian civilization was its inception from the ground up, as the ancient Egyptians had no prior civilization which they could use as a template. In fact, ancient Egypt itself became a template for the civilizations that followed. The Greeks and the

Romans were so impressed with Egyptian culture that they often attributed many attributes of their own culture–usually erroneously–to the Egyptians. With that said, some minor elements of ancient Egyptian culture were, indeed, passed on to later civilizations. Egyptian statuary appears to have had an initial influence on the Greek version, and the ancient Egyptian language continued long after the pharaonic period in the form of the Coptic language.

Although the Egyptians may not have passed their civilization directly on to later peoples, the key elements that comprised Egyptian civilization, including their religion, early ideas of state, and art and architecture, can be found among other civilizations. For instance, civilizations far separated in time and space, such as China and Mesoamerica, possessed key elements that were similar to those found in ancient Egypt. Indeed, since Egyptian civilization represented some fundamental human concepts, a study of their culture can be useful when trying to understand many other pre-modern cultures.

To the ancient Egyptians, as was the case with any society made up of inquiring humans, the world was a confusing and often terrifying place of destruction, death and unexplained phenomena. In order to make sense of such an existence, they resorted to teleological stories. Giving a phenomenon a story made it less horrifying, and it also helped them make sense of the world around them. Unsurprisingly, then, the ancient Egyptian gods permeated every aspect of existence.

Given the abundance of funerary artifacts that have been found within the sands of Egypt, it sometimes seems as though the Ancient Egyptians were more concerned with the matters of the afterlife than they were with matters of the life they experienced from day to day. This is underscored most prominently by the pyramids, which have captured the world's imagination for centuries.

There are few characters in Egyptian myth whose image and name are more widely known than Horus. His name most probably means "the Distant One;" as the celestial falcon, his wings were believed to span the length of the distant sky and his eyes were the sun and the moon.[1] This name betrays the connection Horus shared with Re, the "all powerful" sun god, and also hints at his earlier incarnation as one of the earliest celestial gods in Egyptian religious belief.

One of the earliest images from ancient Egypt is that of a falcon residing in the famous "sun-Barque" of Re, which the ancient Egyptians believed

traversed the sky during the day and crossed the dangerous land of the dead during the night. Horus' place in the sun-barque probably represents Horus as a 'star or planet crossing the Winding Waterway of the sky," since the ancient Egyptians were famous for their complex astronomical system that incorporated many mythical elements, but his position there is much more than being just another of the sun-god's divine entourage. Horus' mythological lineage places him as the direct descendant of the *Ennead,* the nine gods and goddesses who were formed from the earlier abstract concepts in the primordial waters of "Nun". This places him at an interesting crossroads in terms of his relationships with the greater pantheon. Not being one of the Ennead weakens Horus' claim to the divine right of kingship, in contrast to Seth, his uncle, who could claim primacy as one of the Ennead himself. The result of this contention made for a fascinating power struggle and a myth that would have real-world ramifications throughout the vast expanse of Egyptian history.

To the ancient Greeks and Romans, who travelled to Egypt to learn and marvel at the impressive antiquity of their culture, there was some confusion about the two "different Horuses" that appeared in various texts. To the ancient Egyptians, there was an "Elder" and "Younger" Horus who shared familial connections with the earliest deities in the Egyptian pantheon. Their personalities were often distinguished by certain characteristics, including each god's state of "maturity," which was an important source of contention between Horus and his uncle Seth in their attempts to ascend the throne.

Horus would eventually ascend the throne of his father, Osiris, and for this reason he held a deep connection with the throne of united Egypt. The earliest kings were shown as hawks (long considered part of the "Falconidae Family") preying on their enemies, the reason for which lies in the mythological foundation of Horus' life and also in the real world understanding of the "history" of the royal line of kings.[2] Integral to Horus' myths is the notion of royal inheritance. Born of the murdered god Osiris and the magical goddess Isis, Horus' – the younger, at least – life was defined by his establishment of the royal line of Egyptian kings. To the modern Western reader, this notion of gods being mortal and inheriting the power of their fathers may seem a little strange, but, to the ancient Egyptians, stories about feuding mortal deities were par for the rather strange course, and an understanding of the nuances of Egyptian religious belief can go some way towards dispelling that confusion.

Horus: The History and Legacy of the Ancient Egyptian God Who Was the Son of Isis and Osiris looks at the mythology surrounding one of antiquity's most famous deities. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Horus like never before.

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Note

The absolute dating of individual pharaohs has been a matter of long debate among Egyptologists, mostly due to the existence of several king lists that vary in the number of years they assign to each ruler.

The basic outline comes from Manetho, one of two priestly advisors to Ptolemy I (305-282 BCE). Manetho's *History* divides the pharaohs into 30 native dynasties and gives the number of years each ruler was on the throne, but no complete copy of Manetho's work exists.

Other king lists are also fragmentary. The Palermo Stone from Dynasty V (2498-2345 BCE) is a fairly complete list starting from the last Predynastic kings, but it sadly ends in the middle of Dynasty V. The Royal List of Karnak goes all the way to Tuthmosis III (1504-1450 BCE) and is especially useful in that it records many of the minor rulers of the Second Intermediate Period, when Egypt was divided into two or more states. The Royal List of Abydos skips these kings but runs all the way to the reign of Seti I (1291-1278 BCE). The Royal Canon of Turin is a badly damaged papyrus dating to around 1200 BCE that gives the precise length of reign of each ruler, often down to the day. Many portions of the list are missing, however.

Discoveries of other texts and radiocarbon dating have helped refine the dates, but there are still competing theories regarding the chronology, and all have both merits and problems. For the sake of consistency, this work uses the chronology set forth by Egyptologist Peter A. Clayton in his various works. The reader should note that while Clayton's chronology is a popular one, it is by no means universally accepted.

The Origins of Ancient Egyptian Mythology

Ancient Egypt spans a history of some 3,000 years, depending on how people want to divide it up. Many cultures, such as ancient Greece, divided their lengthy histories either according to cultural changes, such as the "Classical Era" beginning with the onset of democracy and ending with the death of Alexander the Great, or by following the reigns of each subsequent ruler. In ancient Egypt, the vast history was originally divided into dynasties. Living in the 3rd century BCE, the Egyptian priest Manetho divided history into 30 dynasties, which later Egyptologists have grouped into longer periods according to how much of what is considered Egypt today fell under the rule of each king. They are given as follows, according to Shaw's chronology:[3]

The Pharaonic Period

Early Dynastic Period (Dynasties 1-2) ca.3050-2660 BCE
Old Kingdom (Dynasties 3-6) ca. 2660-2190 BCE
First Intermediate Period (Dynasties 7-11) ca. 2190-2066 BCE
Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11-12) ca. 2066-1780 BCE
Second Intermediate Period (Dynasties 13-17) ca. 1780-1549 BCE
New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20) ca. 1549-1069 BCE
Third Intermediate Period (21-25) ca. 1069-664 BCE
Late Period (Dynasties 26-31) ca. 664-332 BCE
The Ptolemaic Period 332-30 BCE
The Roman Period 30 BCE – 395 CE

In order to understand why modern scholars chose to divide history into longer periods of dynastic rule, it is necessary to understand the geography of Egypt's ruled dominions. The river that defined and dictated much of ancient people's lives and ideologies, the Nile, runs from south to north, with a sprawling delta in the north and more barren land to the south. This distinction is the reason for one of the most confusing aspects of Egyptian history, as the "Upper Kingdom" was in the south and the "Lower Kingdom" was in the north.[4] These "Two Lands" were represented by two distinct crowns – the "Red Crown" for the Lower Kingdom and the "White Crown" for the "Upper Kingdom" – each worn by their distinct rulers and worn as a "Double Crown" when both kingdoms were unified. It was during the "intermediate" periods that the country was divided into the two kingdoms, and these periods were often marked by political turmoil and a distinct drop in cultural production, such as art and architecture.

From as early as the Early Dynastic Period, the country was divided into smaller dominions along the river that modern scholars call "Nomes". The word "nome" comes from the ancient Greeks who, during the rule of the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty (332-30 BCE) in Egypt, referred to each as a kind of "pasturage" coming under the overarching rule of the Pharaoh of that kingdom. This made for a useful way of organising the inhabitants of the two kingdoms, but it causes problems when trying to define what version of a common myth is the "correct" or "most widely believed". The reason for this is that the myths, though they had some similarities, could diverge widely from nome to nome. That is why writers such as the ancient historian Plutarch chose to single out a particular version of a myth and record or study it alone.

Later scholars further subdivided these various types of myth according to

the cult center that either produced or "standardized" them.[5] They refer to them as "theologies," such as the "Memphite Theology" (myths from Memphis) or the "Heliopolitan Theology" (myths from Heliopolis). There is the theory that these "theologies" were competing in some way with others from different cult centers. Shaw, however, takes the view that they were more alternatives than opposing theories and although each cult center would substitute a god from another nome for one of their own local deities, there wasn't really any kind of animosity between the differing believers. Despite the fact that there was no externally enforced dogma over the whole of Egypt, the Egyptians still managed to maintain some overarching concepts. One such concept is that of the creation of the universe. Generally speaking, there was a limitless dark ocean of "chaos" called Nun, out of which a god was born who instigated creation.[6] The different cult centers felt at liberty to amend or augment that concept to incorporate local tastes and allegiances to deities. Later on, during the period of the New Kingdom, the cult center of Thebes gained prominence and the priests there tried to unify the earlier traditions of Egypt. In this attempt, Amun was the creator god but the Thebans also incorporated the traditions of the major cult centers like Hermopolis, Memphis and Heliopolis, which often seem quite disparate accounts to the modern reader but were quite ingeniously brought together at Thebes around 1200 BCE.[7]

The general creation story contains within it two aspects that are crucial to understanding all of the myths of ancient Egypt: *maat* and *isfet*. Isfet represents chaos or disorder, generally speaking, and it was seen as a fundamental element of everything in existence. There was no notion of trying to eradicate isfet from their general lives in ancient Egypt; after all, it was said to be one of the elements that was present in the limitless ocean at the dawn of creation. The only desire for ancient Egyptians was that isfet never became more prevalent than maat, its opposite: justice. Maat was often depicted as a goddess wearing a feather on her head, which was also the hieroglyph that represented her.[8] She, or simply the concept of justice, was believed to be present in all aspects of life and if it was broken by anyone, there would be a punishment. According to the Middle Kingdom "Coffin Text" it was believed that Atum, the "Great Finisher" of creation,[9] inhaled maat in order to gain his consciousness: "Inhale your daughter Maat [said Nun to Atum] and raise her to your nostril so that your consciousness may live. May they not be far from you, your daughter Maat and your son Shu,

whose name is “life” … it is your son Shu who will lift you up.”[10]

After that, Atum was capable of making the waters of Nun recede away from him, making him rise above them and become “what remained” or the “mound of creation.” It’s important to take note of the fact that there was no creation until Atum inhaled life and justice. Therefore without maat and her dualistic counterpart, there would have been no world, and that is the reason for maat and isfet’s ubiquity, as well as the acceptance of chaos in the world as seen by the ancient Egyptians. After Atum had separated himself from Nun, the children he kept inside, notably Shu and maat/isfet, often represented as a form of the goddess Tefnut, were now separated from their father, and Tefnut would go on to become the mother of all the gods.

The Recording of The Myths

Since each of the nomes had their own version of a given myth, collecting Egyptian myths into a definitive text was never possible. This has further exacerbated the mythologist’s job, since these stories have survived in disparate versions and media.

The myths may have arrived at the hands of scholars from inscriptions on pyramid walls (such as the Old Kingdom’s “Pyramid Texts”), painted on the inside of coffins (such as the Middle Kingdom’s “Coffin Texts”), or texts written on papyri (such as the famous “Book of the Dead,” which dates back to the Second Intermediate Period).[11] The mythologist’s job is made even more exacting by the fact that, since the scribes who documented the myths assumed their readers were knowledgeable about the stories’ details, they opted to refer to myths obliquely out of a sense of decorum. This was often the case for Osiris, whose death was a troublesome topic for those inscribing on the funerary monuments since it was thought that simply mentioning his death could “magically harm the deceased.”[12]

Scenes from the Book of the Dead

The vast history of Egypt makes tracking the development of certain myths a complex process. In terms of the oldest description of death, modern scholars have the Pyramid Texts. These were initially inscribed on the walls of the 5th Dynasty pyramid of Unas at Saqqara,[13] and they documented and gave advice to the king on his journey into the afterlife. These inscriptions were later copied onto other pyramids from the Old Kingdom and have therefore survived in good condition.

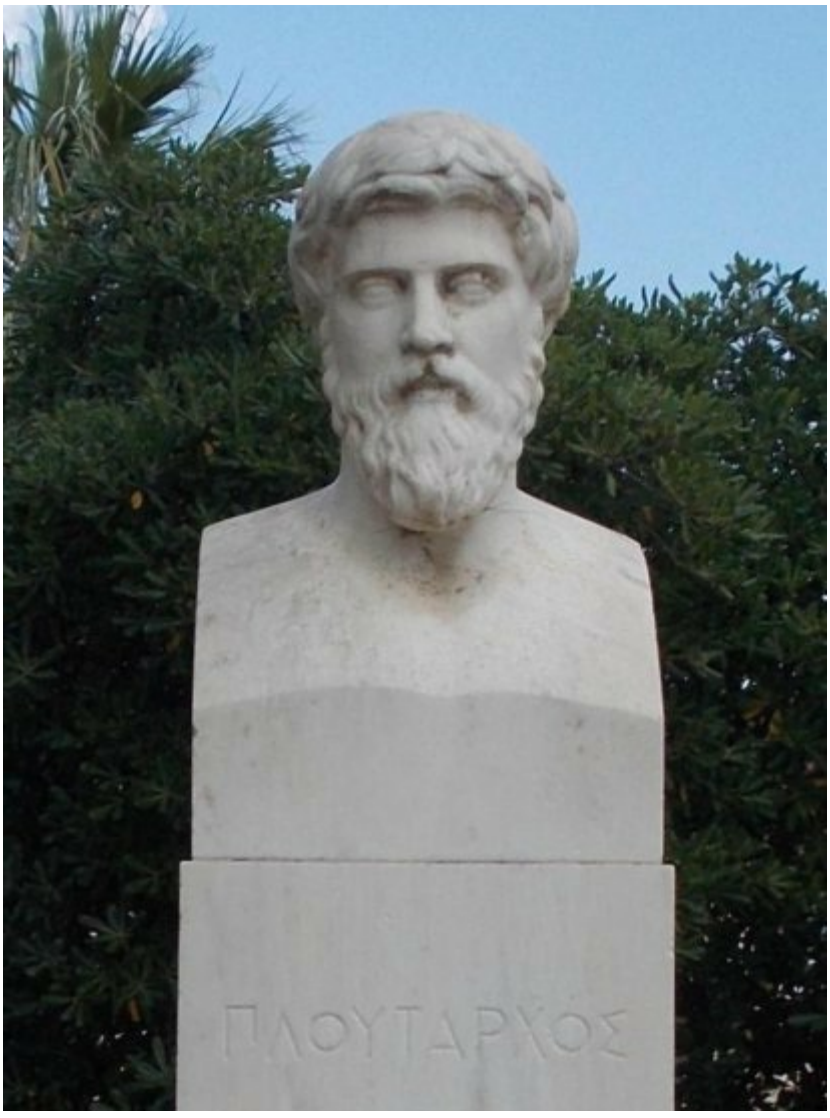
Unas Pyramid Text

Possibly the next most influential source came from the Roman era. Plutarch was a Greek historian and priest who lived in the late 1st and early 2nd century CE. He traveled to Egypt, it seems, but once he arrived there he was incapable of reading any hieroglyphs, so he largely depended on conversations with the locals and also a smattering of earlier literature that speculated on the identity of Egyptian gods and compared them with the Greeks' own pantheon. For instance, to the ancient Greeks the god Amun was Zeus, and the same applied to Hermes and Thoth, Apollo and Horus, and Dionysus and Osiris. The connection between Greece and Egypt was an ancient one and continues to have an influence on modern readers since many of the cult centers of ancient Egypt are referred to by their ancient Greek names, such as Hermopolis the City of Hermes, rather than their ancient Egyptian names, most likely because of the troublesome nature of transliterating Egyptian words. Nevertheless, Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* is the fullest account of the key myth in Egyptian mythology and is the best-known version for modern scholarship too.[14]

Despite the fact that Plutarch's account is late in terms of the wider history of Egyptian mythology, it is a surprisingly accurate take on the formation of the myth of Isis and Osiris, dating back to around 600 years before his

arrival.[15] Of course, this does not make it an accurate account of the much earlier story of Osiris, but since describing his death and dismemberment was not a taboo for a Greek, his later account did not suffer from the obliqueness of the early sources.

Moreover, although Plutarch was not an Egyptian, he was an excellent scholar of foreign mythology. For him, the reason for writing down the myth of Isis and Osiris was to try and find a “fundamental truth” to the myths of both his own culture (of which he was a priest at Delphi for the remaining 30 years of his life) and that of his neighboring culture, which all Greeks considered to be much more ancient than their own. It was his scholarly approach and earnest desire to record the “truth” that makes his already interesting story worthy of study as a genuine account of the myth of Isis and Osiris.



A bust of Plutarch

The Gods as Concepts

Like in many polytheistic religious beliefs, the gods of ancient Egypt were neither omnipotent nor omnipresent, despite appearing in many locations simultaneously in some of the myths.[16] In fact, the ancient Egyptians used to worship the deity of the location they found themselves in, since each deity was more or less "present" in each part of the country. They were decidedly human in their relationships with each other. Just like the ancient Greek gods, they fought and argued, made love and married, and were ultimately capable of death, even if this meant that they would simply be reborn later on. Each god and goddess was "responsible" for an aspect of reality the ancient Egyptians encountered every day but, when they needed to, they could share their powers with another deity, which resulted in a kind of *merging* of the two. This was the case for the "dying sun god" who merged with Osiris so as to borrow his regenerative power and be "reborn" the following day.[17]

In the Memphite theology, the universe is created by the god Ptah, who "conceived the elements of creation in his heart and pronounced them into existence with the divine words as he pronounced their names." Yet some scholars believe that Ptah was only capable of such creation after he borrowed the heart and tongue from Amun, the ultimate creator; as such it was Ptah's being the personification of "creative process" that directed and guided Amun's creative abilities.[18]

When the deities merged or even appeared to take on the attributes of another god or goddess they were said to "literally become" the other deity. Shaw gives the example of Hathor attacking mankind with such a rage that she actually transformed into the bloodthirsty goddess Sekhmet. It might be best to think of the deities of ancient Egypt as manifestations rather than distinct personalities with concrete biographies. As such they helped the ancient Egyptians describe the world around them and, by giving precedents in their myths, explain away the more confusing aspects of why the world is the way it is.[19]

In ancient Egyptian culture the duality of deities – most often manifested in their male/female relationships – was an integral aspect of the belief system. This duality appeared in Nun, the limitless ocean of potentiality out of which the universe was born. Within those waters, the male and female aspects appeared as frogs (males) and snakes (females). There were four couples, according to the beliefs at Hermopolis, making up the eight most important

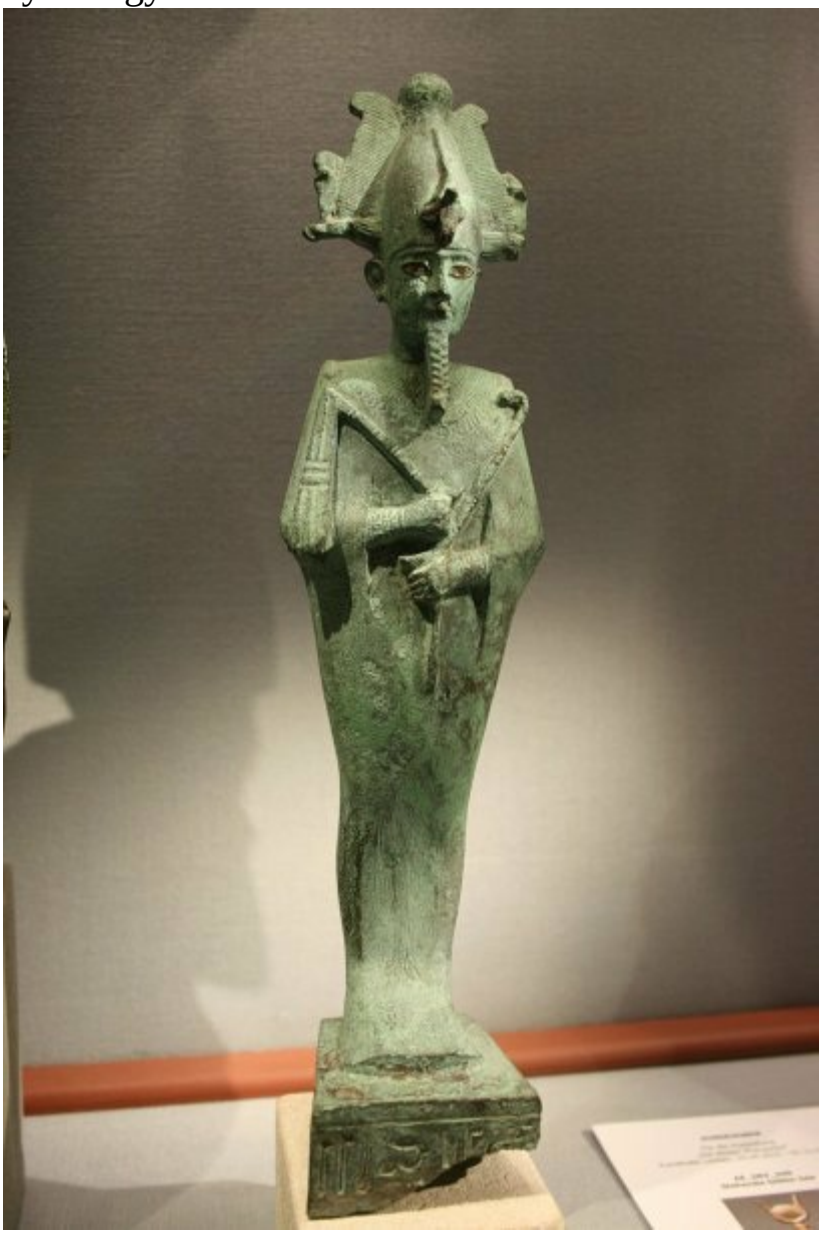
gods of “pre-creation” referred to at this cult center as the “Ogdoad”. Each of these gods and goddesses acquired names and, as a unit, they represented the earliest aspects of reality. Nun and Naunet represented the “limitless waters” out of which everything was created; Huh and Hauhet represented the concept of “infinity”; Kuk and Kauket represented “darkness,” and Amun and Amunet represented the concept of “hiddenness”.[20] Later assessments of the Ogdoad, certainly by the time of the Theban attempt at “unification,” emphasize the role of Amun in the creation of the first island and subsequently of the egg from which the sun god is hatched.

Atum’s children, Shu and Tefnut, were also both siblings and a couple at the same time but their separation from their father led to the separation between an “above” and “below” by Shu, which created all of the space in which life could appear and grow. Also, Shu represented *neheh*, which was the Egyptian concept of cyclical time, whereas his wife came to represent *djet*, which was the concept of “time at a standstill, covering everything that is remaining and lasting, such as mummies or stone architecture,” according to Gary Shaw.[21]

In the coupling of the gods, Osiris and Isis were one of the earliest to have established their incestuous relationship with an apparent “wooing in the womb.” Isis’s role as a wife and mother is unlike any other in Egyptian mythology. The story of Osiris’s death and resurrection is best read with Isis’s agency in mind too. She is not an idle mourner of her husband, nor is she the mere receptacle of a divine birth. She actively seeks out Osiris’s body, performing a magical ritual to acquire from the body enough of Osiris’s “seed” to conceive, and she even goes so far as to poison Re in order to learn his secret names and pass on their power to her child. Similar to Osiris, Isis is an instigator as much as a carer. If Osiris ensures the regeneration and rebirth of the sun, the dead and the crops beside the Nile, then none of those accomplishments would have been brought to fruition without Isis’s unwavering perseverance to resurrect her husband. She is no ordinary “Queen” in the medieval European sense, she was proactive and, as such, defined Osiris as much as he defined her.

Now that the basics of Egyptian beliefs have been presented, the myths will hopefully become a little clearer, or at very least more contextualised. The ability to use original texts is a luxury that is available to modern readers thanks to the passionate and untiring work of translators and scholars around the world, an enormous job that still has vast veins of knowledge to uncover,

and should not be forgotten when enjoying even the most cursory study of this beautiful mythology.



A statue of Osiris wearing an Atef-crown made of bronze

Statuettes of Osiris (middle) alongside Horus (left) and Isis (right)

The Myths

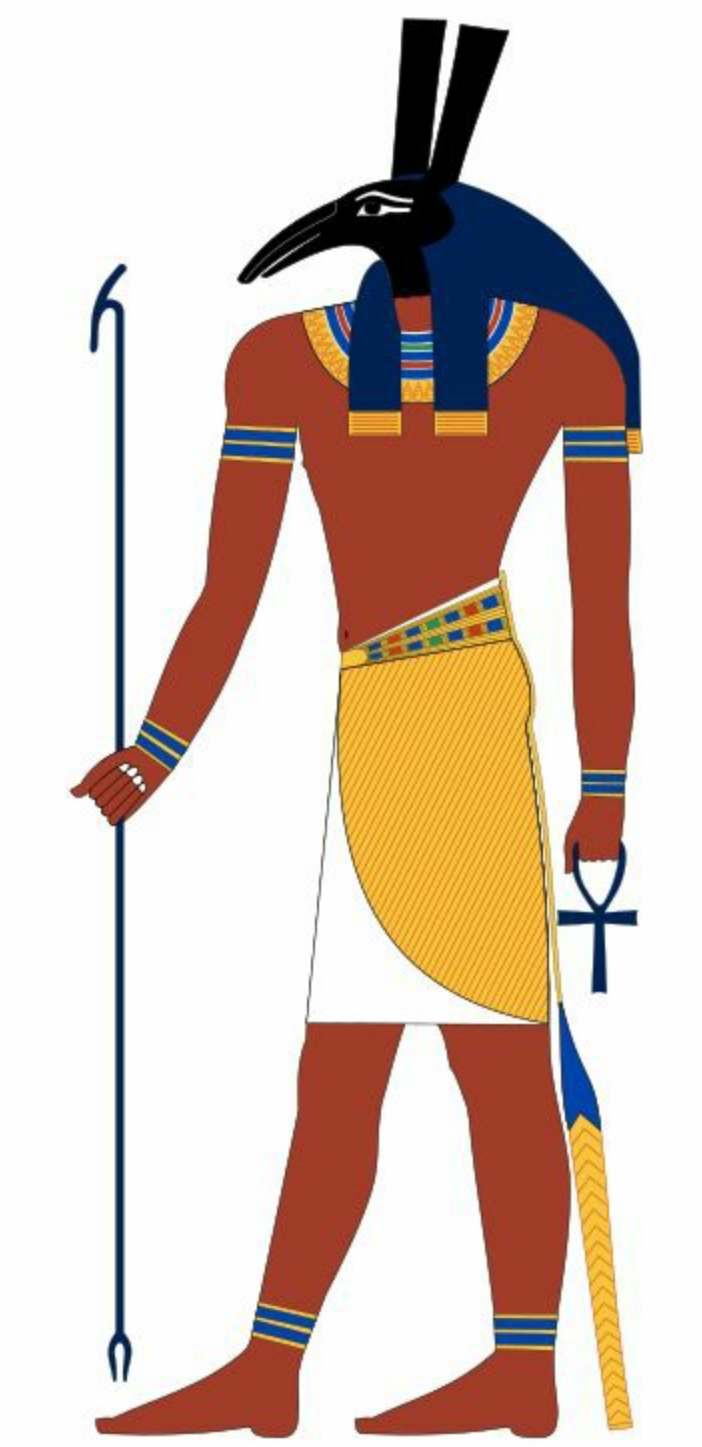
After Shu and Tefnut were separated from their father, they also gave birth to a pair of deities called Nut and Geb. Nut was the sky goddess, often depicted as a naked lady with her hands and feet touching the earth and her body representing the heavens. Geb was the male god of the earth, usually represented as a reclining man with green skin with foliage on it. There is a story told in Plutarch's *Moralia* that equates the Egyptian gods with those of

the ancient Greeks, something Plutarch was prone to do. The story talks about how Nut and Geb (whom Plutarch equates with the Greek deities Rhea and Cronus) can't make love because Shu kept them separated. When they tried to meet in secret, however, they incurred the wrath of the sun or "Re". "They say that the Sun, when he became aware of Rhea's intercourse with Cronus, invoked a curse upon her that she should not give birth to a child in any month or year; but Hermes [Thoth], being enamoured of the [Moon], consorted with her. Later, playing at draughts with the moon, he won from her the seventieth part of each of her periods of illumination, and from all the winnings he composed five days, and intercalated them as an addition to the ['original'] three hundred and sixty days. The Egyptians even now call these five days intercalated and celebrate them as the birthdays of the gods. They relate that on the first of these days Osiris was born, and at the hour of his birth a voice issued forth saying, 'The Lord of All advances to the light.' But some relate that a certain Pamyles, while he was drawing water in Thebes, heard a voice issuing from the shrine of Zeus, which bade him proclaim with a loud voice that a mighty and beneficent king, Osiris, had been born; and for this Cronus entrusted to him the child Osiris, which he brought up. It is in his honour that the festival of Pamylia is celebrated, a festival which resembles the phallic processions. On the second of these days Arueris was born whom they call Apollo, and some call him also the elder Horus. On the third day Typhon [Seth] was born, but not in due season or manner, but with a blow he broke through his mother's side and leapt forth. On the fourth day Isis was born in the regions that are ever moist; and on the fifth Nephthys, to whom they give the name of Finality and the name of Aphroditê, and some also the name of Victory. There is also a tradition that Osiris and Arueris were sprung from the Sun, Isis from Hermes, and [Seth] and Nephthys from Cronus. For this reason the kings considered the third of the intercalated days as inauspicious, and transacted no business on that day, nor did they give any attention to their bodies until nightfall. They relate, moreover, that Nephthys became the wife of [Seth]; but Isis and Osiris were enamoured of each other and consorted together in the darkness of the womb before their birth. Some say that Arueris came from this union and was called the elder Horus by the Egyptians, but Apollo by the Greeks."[22]

Since many non-Greek sources do not include the birth of Horus the Elder in their lists, counting all of the children from Amun (Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris Seth, Isis, and Nephthys) makes up what is known as the

Great Ennead, the group of nine deities who “represented the physical creation of the world.”[23] That Amun was the progenitor of the Ennead does not go far enough towards defining the power he maintained after their birth. It’s important to remember that Amun created Atum and then they became one deity that subsequently birthed all of existence, including the Ennead. For this reason, the ancient Egyptians saw Amun in all things, especially the gods and goddesses of the Ennead, who were understood to be forces called Netjeru (the “gods”) that interacted independently but were always a part of Amun the creator.

Seth was essentially a god of disorder, and although he was associated with confusion, violence and even “evil,”[24] it was in this god’s nature to question and disrupt the status quo, to try and upset the balance of maat and isfet. In the art of ancient Egypt, Seth often appears as a strange animal with an elongated snout, tall rectangular ears and an erect tail;[25] but also as a human with the same animal’s head, a red ox, a desert oryx or even a pig or hippopotamus. In fact, so strange is this animal that most commonly represents Seth that modern scholars have been unable to ascertain what the ancient scribes wanted to depict as Seth’s animal; it has subsequently been referred to as the “Seth (or “Set”) Animal”.



Jeff Dahl's depiction of Seth

An ancient depiction of Horus spearing Seth, who's in the form of a hippopotamus, while Isis looks on

Seth was also the god of the "Red Land," or the desert, which contrasted him with Osiris's son Horus, who was the god of the "Black Land," the fertile soil in the Nile floodplains. This contrast is fairly common in Seth's

character. He had a cult base at Ombos, in Egypt, but he was also said to represent foreigners. Whereas most gods had bones of silver,[26] Seth's were of iron, connecting him with metallurgy in general but, more importantly, with the bellicose metal used later in warfare.

Re gave Osiris the crown of Egypt and invested him with his power in the Heliopolitan nome. However, given Re was the god of the sun and Osiris was not, the new king quickly succumbed to the sheer heat of the sun-god"s crown and began his reign with a wilted expression and a swollen face.[27] He did not die from exposure to the sun-god's crown, however, and so he eventually came to be associated with Re and, later, the Greeks too. As Diodorus Siculus made clear: "Now the men of Egypt, he says, when ages ago they came into existence, as they looked up at the firmament and were struck with both awe and wonder at the nature of the universe, conceived that two gods were both eternal and first, namely, the sun and the moon, whom they called respectively Osiris and Isis, these appellations having in each case been based upon a certain meaning in them. For when the names are translated into Greek Osiris means 'many-eyed,' and properly so; for in shedding his rays in every direction he surveys with many eyes, as it were, all land and sea."[28]

Osiris was said to have two generals, one in the south (Upper Egypt), called Hu, who was the personification of authority itself, and one in Lower Egypt called Sia, meaning "perception."[29]This is an important antecedent of the Egyptian royal power structure. As seen above, the country's history can be written as a history of division versus unity. Having Osiris unify the country with two generals whose name carried such political and military weight was surely not accidental. Osiris's rule was the epitome of kingship and the Egyptians never forgot it.

Osiris grew into a fine and just king, greatly respected by his subjects. In fact, his reign took on the memory of a kind of golden age for the ancient Egyptians. Humans and gods respected Osiris and that led to the constant presence of food and cool winds from the north which tempered the ferocity of the desert. Associating a golden age – whether in the past or the future – with a beloved god or goddess is a common occurrence in all world religions and, in Egypt, Osiris was most beloved of all. This was perhaps because of his love of all the things that give humanity joy, art and wine especially. This association with wine is what convinced many of the ancient Greeks to associate him with their own god of celebration: "And of the ancient Greek

writers of mythology some give to Osiris the name Dionysus or, with a slight change in form, Sirius. One of them, Eumolpus, in his Bacchic Hymn speaks of ‘Our Dionysus, shining like a star with fiery eye in ev’ry ray.’ While Orpheus says ‘And this is why men call him ‘Shining one.’ Some say that Osiris is also represented with the cloak of fawn-skin about his shoulders as imitating the sky spangled with the stars.”[30]

Diodorus Siculus paints Osiris as a “Culture Hero” of sorts. These “culture heroes” were the deities (or even sometimes humans or spirits, as was the case in Native American culture) that instigated certain cultural norms later on. Osiris’s having two generals – one in the north and one in the south – was one such cultural “change” caused by Osiris but Diodorus takes the step further to include cannibalism: “[A]nd after Osiris married Isis and succeeded to the kingship he did many things of service to the social life of man. Osiris was the first, they record, to make mankind give up cannibalism; for after Isis had discovered the fruit of both wheat and barley which grew wild over the land along with the other plants but was still unknown to man, and Osiris had also devised the cultivation of these fruits, all men were glad to change their food, both because of the pleasing nature of the newly-discovered grains and because it seemed to their advantage to refrain from their butchery of one another. As proof of the discovery of these fruits they offer the following ancient custom which they still observe: Even yet at harvest time the people make a dedication of the first heads of the grain to be cut, and standing beside the sheaf beat themselves and call upon Isis, by this act rendering honour to the goddess for the fruits which she discovered, at the season when she first did this.”[31]

Both Osiris and Isis were believed to favor those who nurtured the arts and those who made technological advances as well, according to Diodorus Siculus. This made an argument for the very early technological advancement of the ancient Egyptians, since their first real king after the direct rule of the earth god Geb was a patron of the arts and advancement. “Special esteem at the court of Osiris and Isis was also accorded to those who should invent any of the arts or devise any useful process; consequently, since copper and gold mines had been discovered in the Thebaid, they fashioned implements with which they killed the wild beasts and worked the soil, and thus in eager rivalry brought the country under cultivation, and they made images of the gods and magnificent golden chapels for their worship.”[32]

This desire to see the promulgation of the arts and technology was part of

Osiris's general personality. As a god related to the complex agricultural system the ancient Egyptians invented, Osiris would no doubt have loved and respected knowledge in all its forms from the early days of his worship. It is most likely for this reason that Thoth was his "most highly honoured" advisor, according to Diodorus Siculus. "The one most highly honoured by him was Hermes [Thoth], who was endowed with unusual ingenuity for devising things capable of improving the social life of man. It was by Hermes, for instance, according to them, that the common language of mankind was first further articulated, and that many objects which were still nameless received an appellation, that the alphabet was invented, and that ordinances regarding the honours and offerings due to the gods were duly established; he was the first also to observe the orderly arrangement of the stars and the harmony of the musical sounds and their nature, to establish a wrestling school, and to give thought to the rhythmical movement of the human body and its proper development. He also made a lyre and gave it three strings, imitating the seasons of the year; for he adopted three tones, a high, a low, and a medium; the high from the summer, the low from the winter, and the medium from the spring. The Greeks also were taught by him how to expound (hermeneia) their thoughts, and it was for this reason that he was given the name Hermes. In a word, Osiris, taking him for his priestly scribe, communicated with him on every matter and used his counsel above that of all others. The olive tree also, they claim, was his discovery, not Athena"s, as the Greeks say."[33]

There was a long-standing tradition of people from one culture visiting another and equating the foreign gods to versions of the gods they already worshipped based on their physical or mythological attributes. The Romans did so with the Greeks and the early Germanic tribes, resulting in the Roman Mars being equated with the Greek Ares and the Germanic Tyr very early on. The Greeks also practiced this in their interactions with their neighbours. The Phoenician god Melqart was called "Herakles of Tyre" because of the similarities in their myths.

It might seem difficult at first to understand why the putrefying god of Egypt could be compared with the joyous god Dionysus. However, in the Cretan version of Dionysus's myths, he is not only the son of the Persephone, but he is also once devoured by the Titans (all except the heart, which was the only organ left inside the mummified bodies dedicated to Osiris). As Diodorus Siculus relates, Osiris's connection with this rebirth in agricultural

terms is one aspect the two gods share: “Osiris, they say, was also interested in agriculture and was reared in Nysa, a city of Arabia Felix near Egypt, being a son of Zeus; and the name which he bears among the Greeks is derived both from his father and from the birthplace, since he is called Dionysus. And the discovery of the vine, they say, was made by him near Nysa, and that, having further devised the proper treatment of its fruit, he was the first to drink wine and taught mankind at large the culture of the vine and the use of wine, as well as the way to harvest the grape and to store wine. “[34]

Osiris was also said to have gone on an almost Bacchic adventure before becoming the king of Upper and Lower Egypt. This mimics Dionysus” youthful “wanderings” in which he taught the people of the world about agriculture and, especially, the “fruit of the vine,” while at the same time imposing some kind of benevolent conquest upon them. “Of Osiris they say that, being of a beneficent turn of mind, and eager for glory, he gathered together a great army, with the intention of visiting all the inhabited earth and teaching the race of men how to cultivate the vine and sow wheat and barley; for he supposed that if he made men give up their savagery and adopt a gentle manner of life he would receive immortal honours because of the magnitude of his benefactions. And this did in fact take place, since not only the men of his time who received his gift, but all succeeding generations as well, because of the delight which they take in the foods which were discovered, have honoured those who introduced them as gods most illustrious. Now after Osiris had established the affairs of Egypt and turned the supreme power over to Isis his wife, they say that he placed Hermes at her side as counsellor because his prudence raised him above the king”s other friends, and as general of all the land under his sway he left Heracles, who was both his kinsman and renowned for his valour and physical strength … then he himself left Egypt with his army to make his campaign, taking in his company also his brother, whom the Greeks call Apollo. And it was Apollo, they say, who discovered the laurel, a garland of which all men place about the head of this god above all others. The discovery of ivy is also attributed to Osiris by the Egyptians and made sacred to this god, just as the Greeks also do in the case of Dionysus. And in the Egyptian language, they say, the ivy is called the plant of Osiris’s and for purposes of dedication is preferred to the vine, since the latter sheds its leaves while the former ever remains green; the same rule, moreover, the ancients have followed in the case of other plants also which are perennially green, ascribing, for instance, the myrtle to

Aphrodite and the laurel to Apollo."[35]

After this episode, Osiris meets with Dionysus's favourite mythological beings, the satyrs and muses. Before returning home to Egypt with a plethora of gifts, Osiris spends his time merrymaking in full Dionysian style and giving technology and power to foreign peoples so that they would eventually pay tribute to him later. As Plutarch put it, "One of the first acts related of Osiris in his reign was to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living. This he did by showing them the fruits of cultivation, by giving them laws, and by teaching them to honour the gods. Later he travelled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms, but most of the peoples he won over to his way by the charm of his persuasive discourse combined with song and all manner of music. Hence the Greeks came to identify him with Dionysus."[36]

Similar to Dionysus, then, Osiris was originally a flamboyant merrymaker with a desire to encourage and also disseminate knowledge and technology around the world. He was the instigator of great things for humanity and the gods, and that power did not leave him even after death.

Since the Egyptians considered the subject of Osiris's death taboo to a certain extent, there are very few surviving texts predating the Roman era that describe the subject at length. It is for that reason that most scholars refer to the later accounts of Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch.[37] Furthermore, from what remains of the earlier texts, it seems that the story changed over the centuries, as some versions even have him drowning in the Nile and then floating north as he does in the later versions.

All accounts include the trickery of Seth and the brutality of Osiris's murder. "During his absence the tradition is that Typhon [Seth] attempted nothing revolutionary because Isis, who was in control, was vigilant and alert; but when [Osiris] returned home [Seth] contrived a treacherous plot against him and formed a group of conspirators seventy-two in number. He had also the co-operation of a queen from Ethiopia who was there at the time and whose name they report as Aso. [Seth], having secretly measured Osiris"s body and having made ready a beautiful chest of corresponding size artistically ornamented, caused it to be brought into the room where the festivity was in progress. The company was much pleased at the sight of it and admired it greatly, whereupon [Seth] jestingly promised to present it to the man who should find the chest to be exactly his length when he lay down in it. They all tried it in turn, but no one fitted it; then Osiris got into it

and lay down, and those who were in the plot ran to it and slammed down the lid, which they fastened by nails from the outside and also by using molten lead. Then they carried the chest to the river and sent it on its way to the sea through the Tanitic Mouth. Wherefore the Egyptians even to this day name this mouth the hateful and execrable. Such is the tradition … The first to learn of the deed and to bring to men's knowledge an account of what had been done were the Pans and Satyrs who lived in the region around Chemmis, and so, even to this day, the sudden confusion and consternation of a crowd is called a panic. Isis, when the tidings reached her, at once cut off one of her tresses and put on a garment of mourning in a place where the city still bears the name of Kopto. Others think that the name means deprivation, for they also express "deprive" by means of "koptein." But Isis wandered everywhere at her wits" end; no one whom she approached did she fail to address, and even when she met some little children she asked them about the chest. As it happened, they had seen it, and they told her the mouth of the river through which the friends of [Seth] had launched the coffin into the sea. Wherefore the Egyptians think that little children possess the power of prophecy, and they try to divine the future from the portents which they find in children's words, especially when children are playing about in holy places and crying out whatever chances to come into their minds.

The Conception of Horus

There are many confusing aspects of Egyptian mythology, but the fact that Isis became pregnant with Osiris' child before she had managed to fully resurrect him is surely one of the most iconic. The story, which appears to be a demonstrative myth of the reasoning behind mummification, is also an excellent example of Isis' power and tenacity, since she not only had to restore her husband to life, but she also had to find and collect all of the dismembered pieces of his body that Seth had scattered across Egypt. The account found in the Great Hymn to Osiris (Stele of Amenmose) is short, but it is the fullest among pre-Roman sources:

> "Thy sister [Isis] acted as a protectress to thee [Osiris]. She drove [thy] enemies away, she averted seasons [of calamity from thee], she recited the word (or, formula) with the magical power of her mouth, [being] skilled of tongue and never halting for a word, being perfect in command and word. Isis the magician avenged her brother. She went about seeking for him untiringly.
>
> "She flew round and round over this earth uttering wailing cries

> of grief, and she did not alight on the ground until she had found him. She made light [to come forth] from her feathers, she made air to come into being by means of her two wings, and she cried out the death cries for her brother. She made to rise up the helpless members of him whose heart was at rest, she drew from him his essence, and she made therefrom an heir. She suckled the child in solitariness and none knew where his place was, and he grew in strength. [Horus'] hand is mighty (or, victorious) within the house of Geb, and the Company of the Gods rejoice greatly at the coming of Horus, the son of Osiris, whose heart is firmly established, the triumphant one, the son of Isis, the flesh and bone of Osiris..."[38]

Shaw likens this myth to the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony in which two Egyptian priests would stand on either side of the mummy they were attending and touch each part of the body in order to "awaken" it for a journey into the afterlife.[39] Whether it inspired the ritual or was the definition of it later is almost impossible to verify today, but what is more important, perhaps, is the line towards the end of the hymn that reads "those who defeat iniquity rejoice in the House of Geb to bestow the divine rank … and the sovereignty upon him whose it is by right." This is a direct reference to the dynastic heritage the kings of Egypt said reached as far back as the earth-deity Geb, through Osiris and Horus. This was paramount to the legitimacy of the thrones of both Upper and Lower Egypt and it was a function of Horus as the restorer of dynastic order to the country.

During Horus' birth, Isis not only ensures that he is born from Osiris' already-deceased body, but she also tricks the sun god Re into revealing the secret and powerful names he hid from the other gods, which she could then pass on to her son. Osiris was no passive father either, despite his death. As Plutarch relates, there was a story of Osiris embodying the departing king by passing on the knowledge he had learned to his son: "Later, as they relate, Osiris came to Horus from the other world and exercised and trained him for the battle. After a time Osiris asked Horus what he held to be the most noble of all things. When Horus replied, "To avenge one's father and mother for evil done to them," Osiris then asked him what animal he considered the most useful for them who go forth to battle; and when Horus said, "A horse," Osiris was surprised and raised the question why it was that he had not rather said a lion than a horse. Horus answered that a lion was a useful thing for a man in need of assistance, but that a horse served best for cutting off the

flight of an enemy and annihilating him. When Osiris heard this he was much pleased, since he felt that Horus had now an adequate preparation."

It is at this point that many of the gods saw the youth Horus and began to offer him their allegiance in his bid to wrest the double-crown of Egypt from his wicked uncle Seth. "Horus the Child" was written Hor pa Khered in the original and when the Greeks encountered this divinity they transliterated it almost identically, giving the young Horus the new name "Harpokrates,"[40] a name that appeared in many of the later sources. In ancient Egypt children were usually depicted as naked and with shaved heads except for a "plaited side lock" of hair,[41] and this is how Harpokrates appears in the artwork as well; his role as the child of the "divine triad" was to symbolize the "renewal of the cosmos," further confirming him being Horus to the ancient Egyptians.

Horus the Child also had a more forceful incarnation that bore the name of "Shed," meaning "the savior." This child was often depicted vanquishing dangerous animals such as crocodiles, snakes, lions and antelopes. Associating a small child with such violence was not an unlikely aspect in myth, not even to the ancient Greeks, who immediately connected Horus the Child with Hercules' vanquishing of the snakes sent to his crib by his jealous stepmother Hera. Nevertheless, texts found on magical statues refer to Horus the Child being poisoned by either a snake or a scorpion and Isis using her magic to cure him. Pinch points out that this episode was often seen as analogous to the gods" promise to protect suffering humankind; having a "line of kings" who had suffered as humans do was obviously attractive from a religious perspective.

According to Tyldesley, the state of health in general – both in adults and children – was low. Modern scientific methods have revealed that many ancient Egyptians suffered from parasitic infections and worse.[42] In the case of Horus, these afflictions came in the form of nightmares, burns, and pains that were described as having affected him in the form of demons or worms that burrowed inside and caused maladies such as colic.[43]

In the story of Isis and the Seven Scorpions, Isis takes Thoth's advice and flees from Seth with the baby Horus in tow. She takes with her the seven children of the scorpion goddess Serket, each a ferocious scorpion in its own right, in order to protect her and her child. At one point in the story, however, they are turned away from the house of a rich woman. The disgruntled scorpions all give their sting to the largest of the group, who crawls under the rich woman's door and stings her child. Suddenly the house erupts in flames

and not even the sudden storm above can put them out. Isis appears at the house and, being kind-hearted, she picks up the child and rubs its throat while reciting the names of each of the seven scorpions. When she does so, the flames abate and the storm ceases. Such is the power of Isis' magical knowledge.

This connection between Horus and a scorpion was also connected with the ancient Greek story of Orion, as well as that of Hercules. According to Plutarch, the scorpion was sent by Seth to sting Horus during the hottest part of the summer. According to the historian Robert Graves, the constellation of Orion would have risen to prominence during the month of August for the earliest recorders of the myth and during this early myth Orion, like Horus, did not die from the scorpion's sting.[44] Instead, like the very early story of Gilgamesh, the "scorpion-men" attacked the "sacred king" who was connected with the sun.

Horus The Elder

It's necessary to understand the notion of the "two Horuses," even though absolute clarity is impossible due to the lack of source material and other such limitations. There is the celestial falcon, the "Distant One" who appears in the earliest versions of the myth in the Pyramid Texts, and it is he who is mature and helps Isis and Nephthys recover the body parts of Osiris. This version is the one often referred to as "Horus the Elder," and even as late as the Ptolemaic Period he was represented as the Horus who protects Re in the sky.[45] By the 6th Dynasty, "Horus the Child" had been added to the Pyramid Texts, and it was in this form that Horus was assimilated into Heliopolitan mythology and came to dominate the myths from then on.[46]

A Greco-Roman figurine of Horus as a falcon

An Egyptian figurine of the Horus Falcon

Like other deities, Horus the Elder became assimilated with the sun god depending on the situation, and when he did he became Ra-Harakhti, or Ra-Horus of the Double Horizon, who "triumphed over his enemies as he rose in the east." This came about because the sun was seen as triumphing over the dangers in the land of the dead; dangers such as ferocious beasts, powerful demons and the possibility of losing one's way in the labyrinthine realm, and never returning to life. This connection also gave way to Horus the Younger's connection to his father Osiris, Lord of the Underworld.[47] In this incarnation, both Horuses were represented as a falcon crowned with a sun disk, or even as a winged sun disk itself, that traversed the sky and protected the sun that was the source of Egypt's wealth along with the Nile.

The Contendings of Horus and Seth

After Horus had survived the difficulties of his childhood in hiding, he came to manhood and demanded the throne that had been his father's. During his time in hiding, Seth had harassed Isis and her sister Nephthys often in order to eradicate his last remaining obstacle to the throne. Accounts vary about the exact length of his reign, but it is generally understood that, when

Osiris died and Isis took Horus into hiding, Seth ascended the throne of Egypt and “brought wickedness to the land”.[48]

By far, the fullest and most interesting source for the resolution of the contest for the throne comes from a New Kingdom papyrus called the Beatty Papyrus I, which provides the story called the Contendings of Horus and Seth.[49] The text describes a tribunal of the Ennead and some other gods in which they debate who should ascend the throne, the inexperienced youth or the uncle. Both pretenders had their supporters and Seth even has the “all powerful Re” on his side. Shu declares that it is “just” that the son ascend the throne, and both Thoth and Isis declare themselves triumphant, provoking the anger of Re since they did not wait for his agreement.

Agreeing with Re, Seth offers to settle matters with a fist fight against the young upstart and the gods bicker and fail to come to a decision. Re first asks the Ennead to send a letter to Banebdjedet, the ram-headed god and “Lord of Carnal Pleasure,”[50] for help, but he only succeeds in telling them to send another letter to Neith, the “Great Goddess’ of hunting and war. Neith replies bluntly: “Award the office of Osiris to his son Horus. Don’t commit such blatant acts of inequity which are illegal, or I shall become so furious that the sky will touch the ground. The Universal Lord, the Bull who resides in Heliopolis, ought to be told: Enrich Seth in his possessions. Give him Anath and Astarte, your two daughters, and install Horus in the position of his father Osiris.”

Thoth receives the letter and reads it out to the Ennead who all agree that Neith is right, but Re refuses to acquiesce to her judgment since it is not in line with his own wishes. Livid, he accuses Horus of being too young and unprepared for the office as well as having bad breath to boot. The gods continue to fail at convincing Re of Horus’ right and soon enough they all leave the hall furiously, decrying Re’s injustice. “After a considerable while Hathor, Lady of the Southern Sycamore, came and stood before her father, the Universal Lord, and she exposed her vagina before his very eyes. Thereupon the great god laughed at her. Then he got right up and sat down with the Great Ennead. He said to Horus and Seth: “speak concerning yourselves."

The episode may appear unseemly to the modern reader of this presumably religious text, but it is actually quite similar to the Greek episode in which the goddess Baubo reveals her vagina to make Demeter laugh and put an end to the destruction she wrought after losing Persephone. Laughter, according to

Lewis Hyde, is used in this case as a form of breaking the spell on an exceedingly bad mood.[51] With Re being more amenable, the gods return to the hall and Seth states his position first. "As for me, I am Seth, greatest in virility among (the) Ennead, for I slay the opponent of Re daily while I am at the prow of the Bark of the Millions, whereas not any (other) god is able to do it. I should receive the office of Osiris."

At this, the gods Onuris and Thoth begin to argue that the living son should gain the throne of his father. In response, Banebdjedet asks them if a mature and able uncle should be passed over to crown an inexperienced “lad.” Isis, furious, says that she wants to bring the tribunal to Atum himself. At this the rest of the Ennead tell her such measures need not be resorted to. Seth interjects, saying he won’t recognise any tribunal that Isis is a part of and, at this, Re orders the tribunal to move “across the river” to the neutral “Island in the Middle,” and decrees that the divine ferryman Nemty not allow Isis – or any who look like her – to cross so that the rest of the gods can debate the issue soberly.

> “Then Isis came and approached Nemty, the ferryman, as he was sitting near his boat, after she had transformed herself into an old woman who walked with a hobble and (wore) a small golden signet-ring on her hand. She said to him, "It is in order that you might ferry (me) across to the Island in the Middle that I come to you, because it is for the young lad that I have come carrying this bowlful of porridge, since he has been tending some cattle on the Island in the Middle for five days now and is hungry."
>
> He said to her, "I have been told not to ferry any woman across."
>
> But she said to him, "It is with reference to Isis that you have been told this which you have (just) mentioned."
>
> He said to her, "What will you give me in order that you may be ferried across to the Island in the Middle?"
>
> Said Isis to him, "I will give you this cake."
>
> He said to her, "What good is it to me, your cake? Is it in exchange for your cake that I should ferry you across to the Island in the Middle when I have been told not to ferry any woman across?"
>
> Then she said to him, "I will give you the golden signet-ring which is on (my) hand."
>
> And he said to her, "Hand over the golden signet-ring."

And she gave it to him. Then he ferried her across to the Island in the Middle.”

On the island, Isis found the Ennead sitting and eating bread together but before she could be detected she transformed herself into a beautiful maiden, knowing that the insatiable Seth wouldn’t be able to resist trying to woo her once he caught sight of her. She was right, and Seth darted out from the divine company, overtook the disguised Isis and called to her from behind a tree.

He said to her, "I am here with you, beautiful maiden."

And she said to him, "Respect, my great lord. As for me, I was a wife (living) with a cattleman to whom I bore a son. My husband died, and the lad started tending his father’s cattle. But then a stranger came and settled in my stable. He said thus in speaking to my son, “I shall beat you and confiscate your father’s cattle and evict you,” said he in speaking to him. Now it is my desire to have you afford him protection."

Thereupon Seth said to her, "Is it while the son of the male is still living that the cattle are to be given to the stranger?"

And so Isis transformed herself into a kite and flew up and perched on top of an acacia tree. She called to Seth and said to him, "Be ashamed of yourself. It is your own mouth that has said it. It is your own cleverness that has judged you. What comeback do you have now?"

Having been tricked, Seth returns to the rest of the Ennead and, although he’s ashamed, he turns the blame on the “tricky woman” Isis, instead of acknowledging her logic. Pre-Harakhti asks him what made him seem so dejected and he told her what Isis’ question had been.

Thereupon Pre-Harakhti said to him, "Now look here, it is you yourself that has judged your own self. What comeback do you have now?"

So Seth said to him, "Have Nemty, the ferryman, brought and severe punishment inflicted upon him, saying, “Why did you let her be ferried across?” So it shall be said to him."

Then Nemty, the ferryman, was brought before the Ennead, and the forepart of his feet removed. So Nemty abjured gold even to this day in the presence of the Great Ennead, saying, "Gold shall

be because of me an abomination unto my city."

Then the Ennead ferried across to the western tract and sat down on the mountain.

The great Atum then sends a letter to the Ennead on the island, declaring that the white crown of Egypt should be put on Horus' head and still the decision is not agreed upon. Seth is livid and challenges Horus to submerge himself in water in the form of a hippopotamus, so that they can fight as the ferocious beasts, at which point Isis fears for her son's life again and decides to take matters into her own hands.

Then [Isis] fetched a skein of yarn. She fashioned a line, fetched a deben-weight's (worth) of copper, cast it in (the form of) a harpoon, tied the line to it, and hurled it into the water at the spot where Horus and Seth had submerged. But then the copper (barb) bit into the person of her son Horus. So Horus let out a loud shriek, saying, "Help me, mother Isis, my mother. Appeal to your copper (barb) to let go of me. I am Horus, son of Isis."

Thereupon Isis let out a loud shriek and told (her) copper (barb), "Let go of him. See, it is my son Horus. He is my child."

So her copper (barb) let go of him.

Then she again hurled it back into the water, and it bit into the person of Seth. So Seth let out a loud shriek, saying, "What have I done against you, my sister Isis? Appeal to your copper (barb) to let go of me. I am your maternal brother, Isis."

Then she felt exceedingly compassionate toward him. Thereupon Seth called to her, saying, "Do you prefer the stranger to (your) maternal brother Seth?"

So Isis appealed to her copper (barb), saying, "Let go of him. See, it is Isis's maternal brother whom you have bitten into."

Then the copper (barb) let go of him.

Horus, son of Isis, became furious at his mother Isis and went out with his face as fierce as an Upper Egyptian panther's, having his cleaver of 16 deben-weight in his hand. He removed the head of his mother Isis, put it in his arms, and ascended the mountain. Then Isis transformed herself into a statue of flint, which had no head.

Said Pre-Harakhti to Thoth, "What is that which has arrived

having no head?"

So Thoth told Pre-Harakhti, "My good lord, that is Isis the Great, the God's Mother, after Horus, her son, removed her head."

Thereupon Pre-Harakhti let out a loud cry and said to the Ennead, "Let us go and inflict severe punishment upon him."

Then the Ennead ascended those mountains in order to search for Horus, son of Isis.

Still smarting from the injustice doled out to him by the Ennead and even his own mother, the young Horus takes himself off to relax under a shenusha tree in the western Red Lands of the desert. The Ennead search the length and breadth of Egypt for the young pretender but it is Seth who spots Horus first. Approaching him stealthily, the older god pounces on his nephew and, in an instant, gouges out his eyes and places them on a mountain to "illuminate the earth." When the Ennead exhaust the land in their search they reunite, and ask Set if he had any luck finding Horus, to which the wily god replies that he has not.

A depiction of Horus as a falcon holding Shen rings in his talons

Not wanting to abandon the search for her foster son, Hathor continues to leave no stone or grain of sand unturned and eventually finds Horus weeping in the shade of the shenusha tree. Horrified at the sight, the divine wet nurse finds and milks a gazelle and pours the milk in each of Horus' eye sockets, healing him, before returning to the Ennead to tell them of Seth's treachery. When they learn of this, they decide Seth needs to be punished so they call

both pretenders to the throne to yet another tribunal.

Then they were brought before the Ennead. Said the Universal Lord before the Great Ennead to Horus and Seth, "Go and obey what I tell you. You should eat and drink so that we may have (some) peace. Stop quarreling so every day on end."

Then Seth told Horus, "Come, let's make holiday in my house."

Horus told him, "I"ll do so, surely, I"ll do so, I"ll do so."

Now afterward, (at) evening time, bed was prepared for them, and they both lay down. But during the night, Seth caused his phallus to become stiff and inserted it between Horus's thighs. Then Horus placed his hands between his thighs and received Seth's semen. Horus went to tell his mother Isis, "Help me, Isis, my mother, come and see what Seth has done to me."

And he opened his hand(s) and let her see Seth's semen. She let out a loud shriek, seized the copper (knife), cut off his hand(s) that were [impure]. Then she fetched some fragrant ointment and applied it to Horus's phallus. She caused it to become stiff and inserted it into a pot, and caused his semen to flow down into it.

Holding her son's seed in her closed hand, Isis travels to the gardener that tended Seth's lush crops and she asks him which vegetables the god ate. The gardener replies that his lascivious master touched none of the vegetables except the lettuces. When she hears this, Isis reaches down and pours the semen onto a lettuce and travels back to the tribunal of the Ennead.

[Seth and Horus] both went to the tribunal and stood in the presence of the Great Ennead. They were told, 'speak concerning yourselves."

Said Seth, "Let me be awarded the office of Ruler, l.p.h., for as to Horus, the one who is standing (trial), I have performed the labor of a male against him."

The Ennead let out a load cry. They spewed and spat at Horus's face. Horus laughed at them. Horus then took an oath by god as follows, "All that Seth has said is false. Let Seth's semen be summoned that we may see from where it answers, and my own be summoned that we may see from where it answers."

Then Thoth, lord of script and scribe of truth for the Ennead, put his hand on Horus's shoulder and said, "Come out, you semen of

Seth."

And it answered him from the water in the interior of the marsh. Thoth put his hand on Seth’s shoulder and said, "Come out, you semen of Horus."

Then it said to him, "Where shall I come from?"

Thoth said to it, "Come out from his ear."

Thereupon it said to him, "Is it from his ear that I should issue forth, seeing that I am divine seed?"

Then Thoth said to it, "Come out from the top of his head."

And it emerged as a golden solar disk upon Seth’s head. Seth became exceeding furious and extended his hand(s) to seize the golden solar disk. Thoth took it away from him and placed it as a crown upon his (own) head. Then the Ennead said, "Horus is right, and Seth is wrong."

And yet, Seth is still incapable of accepting the findings of the tribunal. With Re on his side he once again challenges Horus to a competition to decide the fate of the royal line. He challenges Horus to make a boat and race it along the Nile.

A relief depicting Horus with the crowns

Then Horus built for himself a boat of pine, plastered it over with gypsum,

and launched it into the water at evening time without anybody who was in the entire land having observed it. Seth saw Horus's boat and thought it was of stone. And he went to the mountain, cut off a mountaintop, and built for himself a boat of stone of 138 cubits. They embarked upon their ships in the presence of the Ennead. Then Seth's boat sank in the water. So Seth transformed himself into a hippopotamus and scuttled Horus's boat. Horus took his copper (harpoon) and hurled it at the person of Seth. Then the Ennead told him: "Don't hurl it at him."

Horus obeys the decree of the Ennead and leaves his uncle to nurse his hurt pride. Horus sails down the river to Sais to speak with Neith and remind her that he had bested his uncle again and again and surely now deserves the divine crown of Egypt. Neith was always on Seth's side in the contention between him and his uncle and it dawns on her that there is still one deity that they have not called upon for judgment. Nieth calls on Thoth and has him write to Osiris, son of Re, and have him offer a final judgement. When Osiris reads the letter in the Duat, the Land of the Dead, he replies immediately: "Why should my son Horus be cheated when it was I that made you mighty and it was I (alone) who could create barley and emmer in order to sustain the gods as well as the cattle following the gods, whereas not any god or any goddess found himself (competent enough) to do it?"

When he reads this, Pre-Harakhti replies scornfully saying that barley and emmer would have existed without Osiris' presence and that his judgement is no more forceful or definitive than that of the rest of the Ennead. Osiris replies, "It is exceedingly good, all that which you have done, O you who invented the Ennead as an accomplishment, although justice was allowed to sink down within the netherworld. Please look at the situation also on your part. As for the land in which I am, it is filled with savage-faced messengers who do not fear any god or (any) goddess. I have but to let them go forth, and they will fetch the heart of whoever commits misdeeds and they will be here with me. Indeed, what is the meaning of my happening to be here resting in the west while you are all outside? Who among you is there that is mightier than I? But see, you have invented injustice as an accomplishment. When Ptah the Great, South of his Wall, Lord of Ankh-tawi, created the sky, isn't it so that he told the stars that are in it, "It is in the west where King Osiris is that you shall set every night?" (And he told me), "Now after (the manner of) gods, so patricians and commoners also shall go to rest in the place where you are." So he said to me."[52]

It seems that the threat was the final tiebreaker for the Ennead and although Seth tries to fight Horus again he loses and finally rescinds his claim to the throne, declaring his loyalty to the “rightful heir.” The Ennead crown Horus and Isis gives a “loud shriek” of delight at finally having been vindicated.

A relief depicting Horus in the Temple of Edfu

There are various theories of how this important myth came to be. One theory was that it is a memory of a civil war. This kind of interpretation is known as euhemerism and it entails taking the aspects of a myth and extrapolating real-world events from them, such as the two gods Horus and Seth – each representing a real-world pretender and his followers – battling to take on the throne and establish the patrilineal inheritence used henceforth.

As the story goes, after he defeated his uncle, Horus ruled the two kingdoms of Egypt for 300 years. During that time, he took vicious revenge on all of the followers of Seth, including those who supported him on the terrestrial level by burning down his temples and the towns that housed them. This part of the myth would coincide with the theory that the story represents a civil war, since after the ascension to the throne whoever won the contest would no doubt have tried to consolidate his power and eradicating the troublesome followers of his adversary would have been an effective, if bloody, way of doing so. After Seth, Thoth ruled the land of Egypt for 7,726

years according to the dynastic reckoning and after him Maat ascended to the throne. 11 vaguely named demi-gods then ruled for 7,714 years until the first human pharaohs ascended the thrones as 'sitting Horuses', or "followers of Horus,"[53] awaiting the day of their coronation to receive the royal spirit – or ka – and the day of their death to join the rest of the gods in their celestial existence.[54]

Joyce Tyldesley suggests that the rather laborious format of the myth would not have been so for the ancient Egyptians, who were used to the long drawn-out legal battles that often resulted in the same arguments being presented again and again without a guarantee of a resolution for either side. However, on a spiritual and sociological level it was vital that Horus and Seth eventually arrive at a resolution after their battle. Royal art glorified "Horus the Uniter" and even depicted Seth as "tying together the heraldic plants' of Upper and Lower Egypt.[55] Depending on the artist and the area of Egypt where the narrative was displayed, the reconciliation of Horus and Seth was considered impossible and, instead of having such a powerful adversary, the wise god Thoth was put in Seth's place as the "binder" of the two kingdoms.[56]

From a less euhemeristic and more mythological point of view, the story represents the divine Horus overcoming the dangerous and unbridled virulence of Seth.[57] Some older versions of the myth have Horus the Elder as its protagonist, fighting his brother Seth for the throne, and in these versions the story takes on the theme of a primeval and elemental myth, showing the "celestial falcon" battling the "god of storms' for supremacy in the world of mortals.[58]

In the Contendings version, each god is represented as having played their divine role as well as of having taken sides. In it, Thoth inscribes the formal letters to each of the gods, the others "replying immediately" suggests that although the gods were capable of writing (itself considered a magical act), only Thoth is capable of creating the formal, sacred, non-inflammatory or emotional missives from the councils. Isis protects her son and her brother when she is appealed to and Osiris reminds the living gods of his role in fertility and of his power to destroy them with the horrors of the Duat. Hathor, the wet-nurse, gives "life" by restoring the powerful with the milk she gains from a gazelle. In later myths Nephthys became Horus' wet nurse in the form of the "divine cow," which probably has some connection with the story that Plutarch relates about Isis' role in the dispute between her son

and brother:[59] “Isis, however, to whom [Seth] was delivered in chains, did not cause him to be put to death, but released him and let him go. Horus could not endure this with equanimity, he laid hands upon his mother and wrested the royal diadem from her head; but [Thoth] put upon her a helmet like unto the head of a cow.”[60]

Plutarch wrote that he heard the ending of the Contendings and that he found it “blasphemous,” since Plutarch, who was writing principally in order to make the point that all gods and myths are the same across the world, believed such an act committed by the divine was nothing more than the sacrilegious “whimsy” of poets. However, just as he recorded Horus placing a helmet in the shape of a cow’s head, in the Contendings Isis did not die either, and the rest of the gods replaced her severed head with that of a cow, explaining away this common iconography of Isis.

If Plutarch did in fact read the Contendings, then the episode in which the goddess Baubo reveals her vagina to Re most probably scandalized him even further. From a mythological point of view, however, the solemnity of a moment such as that of Re contemplating his own displeasure with the other gods was not only not immune to the presence of the humorous, it actually needed it. According to the acclaimed mythologist Joseph Campbell, “humour is the touchstone of the truly mythological as distinct from the more literal-minded and sentimental theological mood …their entertaining myths transport the mind and spirit, not up to, but past [the gods], into the yonder void; from which perspective the more heavily freighted theological dogmas then appear to have been only pedagogical lures: their function, to cart the unadroit intellect away from its concrete clutter of facts and events to a comparatively rarefied zone, where, as a final boon, all existence … may at least be seen transmuted into the semblance of a lightly passing recurrent mere childhood dream of bliss and fright.”[61] This is precisely what happens in the Contendings. The laughter breaks the “childhood dream of bliss and fright” and transforms “Re the stubborn and contentious’ into “Re the open-minded judge” who will debate the issue soberly.

For Isis, choosing not to kill her brother is a clear sign that her power is not one of passion, like the wrath of Sekhmet, for instance. Instead, hers is the power of the protector.[62] Tyldesley points out that this side of Isis as a wrathful enemy of Seth – she was capable of killing him and burning his companions to death – was the result of later non-Egyptian influences on the Isis/Horus/Seth myth and not true to the earlier versions of her character that

influenced the writing of the Contendings.

In the Contendings, Seth is an unusual trickster in that through his ambitious scheming, he causes others to become "culture heroes' by creating cultural mainstays such as Isis' papyrus boat, which the ancient Egyptians believed was immune to being attacked by crocodiles, and Horus' boat made of pine and gypsum. These boats were always vulnerable to being scuttled by the ferocious hippopotamuses represented by Seth too. In the case of the lettuce, to ancient readers this would have also been a clear mythological trope of Seth since lettuce was believed to be an aphrodisiac in ancient Egypt. It was even depicted as such on tomb walls. That Seth only ate lettuces – and that he was so easily tricked by Isis in her maiden form – is indicative of his role as a sex-crazed fiend in the story of the Contendings of Horus and Seth.

An interesting cross-cultural similarity the Contendings reveals is that of the difficult relationship between an uncle and nephew in a matrilineal society. Although ancient Egypt was not, at that historical period, a matrilineal society, the importance of agriculture (more highly emphasized even than that of its neighbors in Greece and Rome) and the great antiquity of its civilization appears to be a remnant of the agrarian peoples of the 9th and 8th millennia BCE. Furthermore, although the dynastic lines were patrilineal, women continued to hold a prominent part in the royal structure, with female heirs apparent being more common than in many other cultures in the vicinity.

In the early agrarian communities, the goddess took primacy over the male deities since she was the symbol of fertility and the regenerative powers of the earth. In many modern western myths familial contention is often found between either the father or son – as is the case in Sigmund Freud's theory of the "Oedipus Complex" – or between brothers. However, in matrilineal societies, such as the Trobriand culture studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, the most contentious relationship is that between a boy and his maternal uncle. In those societies the maternal uncle is expected to defer to his nephew but many of the myths present them as enemies whose ostensible relationship betrays the deeply harbored animosity they feel for each other. In the Trobriand society, "magic" is supposed to be passed between maternal uncle and nephew but he often does so unwillingly.[63] In the case of the Contendings, the question of royal inheritance is ironed out through a series of "power plays' Seth inflicts on his nephew, which are constantly refuted and repelled by either the mother or Horus himself. In one of the early

versions of the myth, Isis warns Horus not to let Seth penetrate him but instead to simulate the penetration, as he does, and trick his uncle into releasing his “magic” in a “non-dominating” manner. The essence of Horus’ own magic – at least in iconographical terms – is the eye(s) that his uncle gouges out and is then restored with even more magical potency, thanks to the nourishing milk provided by Horus’ wet nurse. Although these cultures are disparate in nature, the structural similarities in their myths are revelatory in the case of Horus and Seth.

The Eye of Horus

A relief of Horus in the Temple of Seti I

There are many ways that Horus was said to have lost his eye or even both eyes. Most often it is Seth who manages to steal or rip out, depending on the myth, one or both of Horus' eyes and either bury them or destroy them. In some versions, Horus restores his own sight but most often turns to his birth mother or adoptive mother, Hathor, for help in doing so.[64]

The eye is connected with Horus as the celestial falcon whose eyes were both the sun and the moon. In particular, the individual "Eye" that was so often depicted in Egyptian artwork was associated with the moon as its changing shape represented the slow but inevitable restoration of the god's sight.[65]This is the very essence of the eye-gauging moment in the Contendings. The restoration of Horus' sight, like that of his restoration to the throne, was generally framed as a story of the restoration of order and balance to the cosmos. In this respect it was "offered" to the gods by the reigning king, whose very presence on the throne was a symbol of order as imparted upon the earth by the gods.[66]

The eye of Horus, after it was restored to him, was called the Wedjat, and it was a powerful symbol that came to represent the very "restoration to wholeness' that Horus experienced when his eyes were restored.[67] In this capacity it was used as an aid to the deceased, who needed to restore the various parts of their bodies after mummification. In this way, the Eye of Horus was used often in magical spells as being a protective symbol and it was worn on amulets, supposedly to "fell the enemies of the wearer". The presence of dismemberment in myth is a common feature throughout the cultures of the world and when the dismembered parts of the body are restored the myth takes on a deep psychoanalytical function for the believer. The single constant in human existence is the presence of death. The presence of a god, such as Horus or Osiris or Christ, in myth that is capable of evading death through the restoration of his or her dismembered body (the symbol of temporality) provides the believer with hope in transcending their own mortality to divinity.

A Wadjet amulet

Horus and Christ

From its earliest days, Christianity had been spreading across Egypt two centuries before it was finally adopted as the principal religion across the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE. The adoptions of earlier mythic and religious aspects by the first Christians have been well documented and in the case of the "Christ" figure's relationship with Horus there are some interesting connections.

Just as Jesus Christ, Horus was the youngest in the "divine triad" of Egypt's most prominent gods and he also represented the renewal of the cosmos and the establishment of a royal "divine right."[68] His relationship with the destructive force of Seth finds its parallels in the Christian god's ultimate vanquishing of Lucifer. The notion of "demons' was present in Egyptian mythology from the earliest times and, as he said in the Contendings, Horus' father Osiris was capable of unleashing their terrible power on divinities and mortals alike. In later Greek versions of the story, Seth is just such a "demonic" monster in the form of the monstrous primeval serpent Typhon, whom Horus' equivalent Apollo – the "Lord of Light" or "Light of the World – finally vanquishes.

Similarities can also be found in the iconography of Horus. Images of Isis with Horus in her lap were both ancient and easily recognizable across the

Roman Empire thanks to the transport of Isis' cult to its furthest reaches.[69] In a world were religious iconography was potent, the adoption of the "mother and child" motif would have been invaluable in attracting new followers to the earliest cult of Christianity, since these followers would have found something that was both familiar and revelatory in the cornucopia of religious groups of the day.

Since Jesus Christ was a figure of peace, the violence inherent in the battle between good and evil came to be associated with those who fought in his name rather than with Jesus Christ himself. Images of Horus standing over Seth and harpooning his manifestation in the form of a hippopotamus may have inspired the later images of St. George and the Dragon in this way.[70]

Horus was a symbol of divine kingship, of unification and the restoration of the divine after the most vicious and brutal trials and endeavors. He was also seen as the intermediary between the land of the living and the dead.[71] To the ancient Egyptians the king was an almost godlike figure who became a god when he died, and his mummified remains were restored to him in the land of the dead, the Duat. The lord of this land was Horus' father Osiris, and therefore the "divine king" Horus was often presented in Egyptian iconography as presenting the recently deceased king – and later non-royal mortals who were able to pay for mummification – to his father sitting on his throne.[72] In this way, Horus was both the way of the light and also a figure of hope, since it was he (with the help of his mother and the support of the "just" deities) who ultimately vanquished evil and unified the country. For believers in Egypt, a country that went through periods of violent separation, the figure of a just king that restored order to their "world" would have made for a very appealing deity indeed.

From a mythological standpoint, Horus' character goes beyond royal lineage, however. Horus stood at the crossroads of the greater family of gods – the Ennead – that were the first manifestations of the distinctly human characters in the pantheon, as well as that most worrying boundary between life and death. Although his father would receive the dead, it was Horus who showed them that life also offered its own capacity for victory and pleasure, and when the time to pass on to the final and inevitable stage of mortality, Horus would take his believers by the hand and guide them there unharmed.

Online Resources

Other books about Egypt by Charles River Editors

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Other books about Horus on Amazon

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